

First Presbyterian Church (now Downtown
Presbyterian Church)
154 Fifth Avenue, North
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-17

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. TN-17

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (now Downtown Presbyterian Church)

Location: 154 Fifth Avenue, North, Nashville, Davidson County,
Tennessee

Present Owner: Trustees of the Downtown Presbyterian Church

Present Occupant: Congregation of the Downtown Presbyterian Church

Present Use: House of Worship

Significance: Designed by William Strickland in 1849, the First
Presbyterian Church is the largest and best preserved
example of an Egyptian Revival church building in America.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: The cornerstone of the building was laid on April 28, 1849. The church was dedicated on Easter Sunday, April 20, 1851.
2. Architect: William Strickland.
3. Original and Subsequent Owners: The parcel on which the church building is situated was conveyed by Randal McGavock to the Trustees of the Nashville Presbyterian Church [D.C.R.O. Book "Q", p. 722]. It remained in ownership of the church, which became known as the First Presbyterian Church. In 1955, the First Presbyterian Church relocated at Oak Hill and Franklin Road. Some members, however, desired to maintain the present building and work. They purchased the property and organized The Downtown Presbyterian Church (D.C.R.O. Book 2452, p. 181).
4. Builder or Contractor, Suppliers: A. G. Payne and J. C. McLaughlin, masons; W. L. Nance and P. Mallory, bricklayers; and J. M. Hughes, carpenter [Bunting, Manual of the First Presbyterian Church (Nashville, 1868), p. 101].
5. Original plans and Construction: None of the original plans by Strickland are known to exist.

An account in 1868 provides a description of the First Presbyterian Church. It reads in part: "This edifice has a front on Church street of 80 feet, running back along Summer [Fifth Avenue] a depth of 136 feet. The general style of the architecture is Egyptian, but the front, never having been completed, presents an unfinished appearance. A tower 104 feet in height is built on each of the front corners, commencing 22

feet square at the base, diminishing by offsets as it rises, and finishing in the shape of an octagon. Between the two towers are the steps, 36 feet in length, ascending to the main floor or body of the church; the entrance to the vestibule being by three doors, finished in the Egyptian style. The vestibule is 70-1/2 feet long, 16-1/2 feet deep at the center, and 9-1/2 feet deep at the ends. From the vestibule four doors lead to the Audience-room, which is 101-1/4 feet long, and 70-1/2 feet wide. The pulpit is at the south end, opposite the entrance, and the organ and choir are elevated in three double rows -- ten pews of the total number being placed on each side of the pulpit. Eleven hundred persons can sit in the pews, and two hundred in the gallery over the vestibule. Within the towers, on the main floor, are stairways leading to the gallery, which is 70 feet long and 29-1/2 feet deep across the front of the Audience-room and covering the vestibule.

"The basement-story is divided into five smaller rooms, for the various services of the Church, with the necessary coal house, passages, etc. The principal one is the large Lecture-room, which is 70-1/2 x 54-1/2 feet in size; the small Lecture-room is 44-1/2 x 28-1/4; the Pastor's Study is 28x15. There are also two smaller rooms 13-1/2 x 23 The public entrance to the basement is from Summer Street [Fifth Avenue], there being also a private entrance from the rear directly from the Parsonage, and this communicates with a stairway leading to the main Audience-room and having its outlet in rear, and to the right, of the pulpit. The walls of the basement-story are of stone, and well built. The body of the church and the towers are of brick." [Bunting, pp. 101-102].

Originally, the auditorium was larger than at present because the rooms at either side of the pulpit did not exist, the spaces being used as "Amen" corners. The windows were clear glass and had inside shutters. There were box pews with doors instead of the present curved pews. The balcony originally came farther out and down into the sanctuary and was supported by columns. Finally, the walls were gray and the ceiling was smooth. There is no published account or memoir from the period describing the interior appearance of the church. Recollections of the older members of the congregation in this regard, however, were compiled in 1941 by Jesse E. Wills and subsequently published in the Tennessee Historical Quarterly [Wills, "An Echo from Egypt", Tennessee Historical Quarterly, XI, no. 1 (March, 1952), 70-71]. Available evidence and material makes clear that the present appearance of the church represents a substantial departure from the interior

designed by, or at least completed during the lifetime of, William Strickland. Wills' account of the interior of the church prior to major remodeling in the 1880s, as recalled by the older members of the congregation, follows:

"The ceiling was smooth and unbroken. There had been some trouble with an echo, and an attempt had been made to improve the acoustics by stringing one hundred or more small wires from end to end of the ceiling. There was one very large chandelier in the middle, and there may have been side lights also. The rooms to either side of the pulpit were then part of the auditorium. Dr. Bunting speaks of ten pews being placed on each side of the pulpit [see above]. Mr. Harry Myers remembers the box pews as being imitation oak, hand grained, a finish which was popular in those days. Dr. Buckner remembers them as light in color, with panels on the doors, and he thinks the backs were straighter . . . than those of the present pews."

"Even then the auditorium was Egyptian in feeling to some extent at least, because the bands of molding in the shape of an unusual arch or pylon which surround the windows on the inside were apparently there from the beginning. They duplicate a similar molding around the windows on the outside, which appear in the pictures in Dr. Bunting's book, and remnants of this molding can be seen around the windows in the rooms to either side of the pulpit which were once a part of the auditorium. The Egyptian pediments, if they can be called that, over the windows were probably also there from the outside. Likewise, I feel sure the pilasters or half columns along the walls were always there . . . The big difference from now was that the present brilliant colors on the walls were lacking. Everyone remembers them as a drab, medium gray 'like the inside of the Capitol building.' If there was any painted decoration it must have been delicate and subdued, or obscured even then by Nashville smoke, because no one recalls it" (Wills, pp. 70-71).

6. Alterations and Additions: The first alterations and remodeling occurred after Federal forces had occupied the church building from January to August of 1863 and again from October of the same year to 1865. The minutes of the Joint Board of the Church, written by Nathaniel Cross, provide a detailed record of the transactions between the Church and the Federal officers, as well as of the repairs and renovation which were made with the \$7,500 received from Federal authorities. Jesse E. Wills speculates that this work restored the church "more or less as it was when it was first built" (p. 70).

In 1867, the church bell was given by Mrs. Adelia Acklen (later Mrs. W. A. Cheatham). It was made in West Troy, New York, weighed 4,000 pounds, and cost \$3,000. For many years between the '70s and '90s, it was used as the city fire alarm.

In 1876 the iron fence around the church was installed. The Minutes of the Joint Board for May 23, 1876, contain a report by the special committee for the project with prices and a sketch of the proposed fence (on file at the Tennessee State Library and Archives).

According to Dr. James D. Plunket's paper published in 1915, the west facade of the building was brought in line with its present appearance when the two lotus columns, Egyptian in contour and detail surmounted by a pediment, were added in 1880. "in careful conformity to the original design" [Plunket, "The Church Officers and Their Work" in First Presbyterian Church: One Hundred Years of Service (Nashville, 1915), p. 125]. Little is known about the precise circumstances in which this work was carried out and by whom it was performed.

In the spring of 1881 extensive alterations to the interior of the church were begun. Lasting approximately a year, they gave the interior generally its present appearance. The work was performed apparently because plaster was falling from the ceiling and the church interior was in need of repair. The balcony was reduced in size. The amen corners to either side of the pulpit were enclosed to create separate rooms. The frescoed perspective above the doors to these columns showing columns receding into the distance, as well as the remaining similar decor, were also added at this time. The ceiling was coffered, and the square recessed panels were rendered with bits of blue sky and clouds. In addition, the present curving walnut pews were installed instead of the old box pews with doors.

An account of the formal dedication of the remodeled church on Sunday, April 9, 1882, was published the following day in the Nashville Daily American. It provides a descriptive contemporary record of the remodeled interior:

"The auditorium of the First Presbyterian Church was formally re-opened with public worship appropriate to the occasion yesterday. The interest in the event was shown by the very large congregation present, every seat being occupied. A year has passed since first the work of renovation began, but as the building now stands, it is a work of beauty and art, unsurpassed by any in the city, and but few in the country. The walls of the interior have been beautifully frescoed in Egyptian style, corresponding to the Egyptian architecture of the exterior."

"Far back in the history of the world color had always a significance, especially in church architecture exhibited in the ancient temples dedicated to religious worship. In going back to a renaissance, the architecture has reproduced these colors and emblems as follows: Blue represents divine intelligence; red, divine love; bright yellow or gold, divine mercy."

"The lilies on the columns and around the cornice represent purity and innocence; the triangles on the cornice and columns symbolize the Holy Trinity."

"The reeded members of the cornice banded together with gold and with red, symbolize the members of the church held together with the holy band of love."

"These are some of the meanings attached in olden times to designs and emblems used in church architecture."

"The pews were made of rich walnut, highly polished and finished in rich ornate style, without doors. They range around the pulpit in semi-circular array, making desirable every seat in the edifice. The floor is entirely covered with a neat carpet of crimson and garnet coloring. The organ has been painted in walnut coloring occupying, as it does now, a niche in the rear of the pulpit, is much softened and improved in tone. The former two 'amen' corners have been partitioned off, forming classrooms, session rooms, or for such other purposes as are needful. The ceiling is divided into squares, each showing a bit of blue, clouded sky. From these squares suspend twelve small [gas] chandeliers, which with bracket lights, give an ample brilliancy. Taken altogether, the interior is exceedingly handsome in its finish, and will be a source of worthy pride to all connected with the congregation." The total cost of the work was reported by A. G. Adams, Chairman of the Finance Committee, to be \$11,760.

In 1887 the final change was made to bring the interior of the church to its present appearance. The inside window blinds were removed and the present stained glass windows were installed along the side windows, and installed in the windows on either side of the choir in the following year.

Also in 1887, steam heat was installed at a cost of nearly \$2,000 to replace the hot air furnace, probably heated by coal.

A telephone was installed in the church in 1886. However, electric lights were used together with gas lights for some time, and it is not clear precisely when electricity was completely installed.

In 1895 considerable changes were made in the gallery. The ascending platform was built and the opera chairs installed. Also, the two windows were installed in the front wall back of the gallery.

In 1898, the interior of the church was repainted, though without altering the distinctive decor. A Frenchman named De LaMotte did the work.

The last extensive repairs to the building were begun in August 1937 by the Rock City Construction Company. A substantial amount of brick around the towers, weakened by water, had to be torn out and replaced. New roofs were installed over the towers. Both the floors within the towers and the support for the bell were cast of concrete. Steel trusses were anchored to the old rotted wooden trusses above the auditorium ceiling. Part of the foundation stones around the tower were also replaced. On account of termite damage, extensive repairs had to be made in the floor of the Sunday School room under the auditorium, and the supports of the floor had to be strengthened.

Extensive work was also done in renovating the interior, although without altering the previous design. The old plaster was patched, the walls were canvassed and repainted to reproduce the former design.

The structural repairs were completed by June 1938, while the interior remodeling was completed in October of the same year. The total cost of the repairs through the final report rendered by the Board of Deacons on October 24, 1938, was \$37,893.41, the interior renovation amounting to approximately \$4,000 of this sum.

In 1940, iron rails were installed along the steps to the front entrance.

It should be noted that the present organ was installed in 1913, requiring some changes in the choir loft immediately behind the pulpit platform. The screen shielding the choir from view of the congregation below was removed.

Finally, the new Sunday School building to the rear of the church, designed by Nashville architect Henry Hibbs, was begun during World War I and completed in 1919.

(Unless otherwise noted, the above data is taken from Jesse E. Wills' above-referenced article, a well-researched investigation of available documents and church records on file in microfilm form at the Tennessee State Library and Archives in Nashville.)

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated With the Building

In the first church, built on the site in 1816, Andrew Jackson was presented a sword by the State of Tennessee for his services at the Battle of New Orleans. This church burned in 1832 and was replaced by a second building, in which James K. Polk was inaugurated Governor of Tennessee. In 1848 this second building was also destroyed by fire, and construction on this present building was begun the following year.

During the Civil War, Federal forces used the present church as a hospital. The pews were taken out and stored away and the auditorium filled with beds for the wounded. The horses were stabled in what presently is the dining room (hoof prints are still evident in the wooden floor beneath the linoleum). The building was released in 1865 and a sum of \$7,500 paid as reparation by the Federal forces to the church.

During World War II, the dining room in the church building was used to lodge and feed over 20,000 servicemen.

C. Sources of Information

1. Early Views:

An engraving of the church exterior as it must have appeared generally as built in Strickland's lifetime is published in Bunting's Manual of the First Presbyterian Church (Nashville, 1868), page opposite title page.

An exterior photograph of the church is published in The First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee (Nashville, 1915), page unnumbered.

Photographs of the exterior and interior are contained in Gifford A. Cochran, Grandeur in Tennessee (New York, 1946), pp. 108-109.

Similar views as those in Cochran are contained in Agnes A. Gilchrist, William Strickland: Architect and Engineer, 1788-1854 (Philadelphia, 1950), plates 44-45.

2. Bibliography

a. Primary sources

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b. Secondary sources:

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Clayton, W. W. "First Presbyterian Church of Nashville," in his History of Davidson County, Tennessee, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men. (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Co., 1880), pp. 312-313.

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History of Nashville, Tennessee, John Wooldridge, ed. (Nashville, H. W. Crew, 1890), pp. 466-467.

Roberts, Charles E. "First Presbyterian Church", Nashville and Her Trade for 1870 (Nashville, Roberts & Purvis, 1870), pp. 437-440.

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-----, "The Towers See One Hundred Years. The Story of the First Presbyterian Church Building, Nashville, Tennessee." Pamphlet dated April 22, 1951.

Prepared by: Anatole Senkevitch, Jr.
Architectural Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer, 1970

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: A fine example of the Egyptian Revival style, this building's present appearance dates from alterations undertaken in the 1880s.
2. Condition of fabric: excellent.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Approximately 80'-3" x 137'-9".
2. Foundations: Tennessee limestone.
3. Walls: The exterior is a brick veneer laid in stretcher bond.
4. Structural system: Load-bearing masonry walls.
5. Porches: Portico on north front set between two towers has two Egyptian columns supporting a sheet-metal entablature. Entablature has cavetto cornice with triglyph-like gouging and winged orb in center.
6. Chimneys: Seven brick chimneys.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doors: Main entry doors have four recessed panels, square panels top and bottom with two rectangular vertical panels between. On either side are smaller double doors in the same pattern. The pylon-shaped surrounds support cavetto cornices ornamented by triglyph-like gouging.
 - b. Windows: The stained-glass triple-hung sash are set in double windows with pylon-shaped surrounds and cavetto cornices.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Low-pitched gable roof.
 - b. Cornice, eaves: Cavetto cornice on towers, parapet on sides.
 - c. Towers: Brick towers on front corners rise two stories above main structure. The second story of the tower is square and has louvered openings in pylon-shaped surrounds. The third story is octagonal, with louvered openings with no surrounds.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plan: The main entry opens into the vestibule, off of which are the corner towers and a large open room. Behind the pulpit on the south wall are two rooms and the organ. The basement contains a kitchen, a meeting room, and offices. The balcony is along the north wall.
2. Stairways: Northwest corner tower has three-quarter turn with winding stairs. Northeast corner tower has an elevator as well as stairs.
3. Flooring: Exposed wood under pews in sanctuary. Carpet over wood flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted plaster walls and ceilings. Coffered ceiling with rosettes at beam intersections. The south wall, on either side of the pulpit, has a perspective mural of columns meeting a coffered ceiling. The columns on the south wall and pilasters on side walls are painted in brilliant Egyptian colors and designs.
5. Doors: Three wooden panel doors.
6. Decorative features: Solid black walnut altar and trim surround organ pipes.

D. Site:

1. General setting: The church faces north toward Church Street at the intersection of North Fifth Street.
2. Outbuildings: Office and education building connect with south wall.

Prepared by Roy C. Pledger
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
August, 1971

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Historic Sites Federation of Tennessee. This structures was measured and drawn in the summer of 1971, under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Roy C. Pledger, (Texas A & M University), project supervisor; Daryl P. Fortier (University of Minnesoota), architect; and by student architects Gilbert M. Glaubinger (Rhode Island School of Design), Steve P. Roberts (Ohio State University), and Barry S. Williams (Texas A & M University), at the HABS field office, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. The written historical data were prepared by Anatole Senkevitch, Jr. (University of Virginia), in the summer of 1970. Jack E. Boucher of the HABS staff took the photographs in the summer of 1970.